

Chakanza, Joseph C.

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In:

Ndekha, Louis ; Bachmann, Judith ; Munyenyembe, Rhodian ; Kügler, Joachim (Eds.), African Traditional Religions Revisited : Dynamics in Indigenous Religions in 21st Century Africa ; Essays in Honour of Monsignor Professor Joseph Chaphadzika Chakanza, Bamberg : University of Bamberg Press, p. 63-74. 2024. DOI: 10.20378/irb-106009

Bookpart - Published Version

DOI of the Article: 10.20378/irb-106009

Date of Publication: 22.01.2025

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The Unfinished Agenda: Puberty Rites and the Response of the Roman Catholic Church in Southern Malawi, 1901-1994¹

Joseph C. Chakanza

Abstract

The chapter analyses the practice of puberty rites in Southern Malawi and the response of the Catholic Church to the practice. The chapter notes that although the church response to puberty initiation rites is negative and also at most prohibitive, the practice continues among its congregants. The chapter concludes by arguing that the theology and the evangelisation strategy of the Church ought not to be one bent on destroying traditional African religion but fulfilling it and bringing all times and all religions to experience the unity of the saving act of God.

Introduction

This presentation attempts to examine the attitude of the Roman Catholic Church in Southern Malawi towards puberty rites of transition for boys and girls during the past ninety years. I shall raise the following three questions for special consideration: Firstly, how has the Church responded to the on-going practice of puberty rites? Secondly, for what reasons has the Church failed so far to come to terms with it but instead has persistently condemned it? Thirdly, why is it that despite the Church's draconian measures to stop the practice, some Catholic parents secretly still let their children undergo these traditional puberty initiation rites?

The effective presence of the Catholic Church in Southern Malawi dates back to 1901 when the Montfort Fathers, a missionary congregation founded in France in the 18th century, were assigned by Rome to evangelise the region under Monsignor Prezeau, the first Apostolic Vicar. By

¹ This chapter, which came out of a conference proceeding paper, was first published in the journal *Religions in Malawi* (1995). no.5, 3-7. The introductory abstract was added as part of this volume.

1908, the Shire Vicariate had been established under Bishop Louis Anneau. When this longest-serving Bishop retired in 1950, the vicariate was eventually divided into two: Blantyre (1950) and Zomba (1952). With the establishment of the hierarchy in 1965, the ecclesiastical region was further divided into Chikwawa (1965) and Mangochi (1969) Dioceses.

Puberty Rites and the Catholic Church

The ethnic composition of the ecclesiastical region comprises the indigenous Nyanja and Mang'anja as well as the Lomwe, Yao and Sena immigrants from Mozambique. Apart from the Sena who are patrilineal, all the other ethnic groups are matrilineal, with communal institutions for puberty initiation for boys and girls which are broadly similar in content and practice. Puberty rites confer the status of adults to the initiated boys and girls together with the rights, duties and obligations that go with the new status in the given society. At a deeper level, the adult status forges a new vital link for the initiates with the ancestral lineage for whom life is perceived as continuing.

Initiation rites at puberty collectively known as *chinamwali* are of different types and are called by different names in various societies. For boys they are called *Chidotolo* (Lomwe), *Lupanda*, and *Jando* (Yao).² Their main feature includes circumcision. The girls' puberty rites are two-fold: the pre-puberty rite called *Chiputu* (Nyanja, Yao) for the ones between the age of seven and eleven, and *Ndakula* (Nyanja) for others who have experienced their first menstrual flow.

These communal initiation rites take place in a camp located in the bush, where water is available. Initiation huts called *thedzo* or *simba* are built. The camp is 'medicated' to give it some kind of mystical protection against the influence of evil spirits, witches and dangerous animals such as lions and leopards. This act is called *kusirika simba* (lit. to protect the camp or hamlet). Traditionally, the bush is the home of the spirits. It is believed that spirits have a transforming power. That is why people go to the bush for rites of transition and transformation.

Puberty initiation rites take place during the dry season, between May and October. Boys who have attained or are about to attain physiological puberty are brought to the initiation camp for the *Chidototo/Lupanda/Jando*. They

² Jando is the Islamicized version of the traditional Lupanda.

are circumcised on the day of arrival. This act is purificatory insofar as it removes the dirt that accumulated under their foreskins before circumcision. With the actual flow of semen, the boys attain physiological maturity. The transition from childhood to adulthood is completed when they take a ritual bath after the wounds are inflicted. In the meantime the sponsors (*anamkungwi*) teach the boys some riddles and instruct them on good conduct and matters pertaining to sex, including proper sexual behaviour. The coming out ceremony – which takes place after two or three weeks – is celebrated with pomp and dignity.

The girls who go into the initiation camp for the Chiputu pre-puberty initiation rites are taught by their sponsors how to elongate their labia minora. It is maintained that: “The ‘inner lips’ have an important function during sex play, it is believed that they stimulate the man in bed. A man is unhappy if his wife does not have the ‘inner lips’ elongated” (Linden & Linden, 1974).

The practice of elongating the labia minora is very much encouraged among young girls before they reach puberty. Failure to do so means that a girl risks to be divorced once she gets married. During the two weeks that the girls are in the camp, their sponsors instruct them on the physiological changes that will take place in their life, and how to deal with these changes. Issues discussed include menstruation, proper behaviour and decency in dress. The coming out ceremony marks the end of the rite.

The second rite for girls called Ndakula is a social and physiological initiation rite for those who have just experienced their first menstrual flow. The ceremony – which lasts two to three days – is usually held in private. Each candidate is initiated individually. The rite marks the transition from girlhood to motherhood, with all the rights, duties, obligations and privileges that go with this status. The instructions given on this occasion are on good manners, decency, cleanliness, proper sexual behaviour and human fertility.

In order to understand how the Catholic Church has responded to the practice of initiation at puberty, a brief overview of the interaction between the missionaries and the local people will be helpful. The late arrival of the Catholic missionaries in southern Malawi coincided with the migration of the Lomwe and Yao from Mozambique at the close of the 19th century. This brought the Lomwe especially into contact with the Catholic Missionaries since the autochthonous Mang’anja and Nyanja had already come under the influence of the Protestant Missionaries. It was actually

the Protestant Missionaries who had directed the Catholic to the immigrants who, providentially, were to become the largest ethnic group in the church in southern Malawi.

Compared with the already established Protestant Missionaries, the Catholic Missionaries who came mostly from the rural areas in France, were more flexible and easier to approach than their counterparts. However, although they permitted or tolerated the consumption of local beer, they showed no compromise when it came to puberty rites. Coming from a nineteenth-century background of a theological tradition which unwittingly posed a negative attitude towards African traditional institutions, the pioneer missionaries had no other alternative but to institute a Christian puberty rite. This strategy was adopted to prevent converts from taking part in the traditional puberty rites. In the early 1940s, Bishop Louis Auneau made the first attempt to set up a rival Christian institution for the puberty initiation rite:

The idea behind the move was to bring about inculturation. The children had to gather together at a church centre or out-station and had to be told what chinamwali was all about so that they should not be curious about it and desire to join pagan initiation camps. And also to tell the children the facts of life in a Christian way and Christian atmosphere. There were no physical operations during such gatherings. The agents were selected people: women for girls and men for boys. All of them had to be under the supervision of the Catechist or a priest if he was available. The seclusion period was generally one week. Facts of life and a bit of taboos on how to behave towards elders were the main topics. The experiment was abandoned on the directives of Bishop Auneau who got to know that during such gatherings there were abuses in the sense that the instructors were teaching the children objectionable things (Letter, Bishop M.A Chimole to Fr. Vincent Chilolo, April, 1987).

There is no doubt that the experiment was indeed a break-through, granting that it was initiated by a pioneer missionary bishop, a product of the nineteenth century-French piety. Neither the Bishop nor his missionaries had made any real effort to study in depth and without prejudice the traditional initiation rites in order to determine their positive and negative aspects.

After the dismal failure of this experiment came a decentralized form of counselling by a group of elderly Christian women called *alangizi*. Their duty was to give advice and counsel to Christian youth who had come of age. This group, though distrusted by some Christians because of its superficial counseling or other known abuses, has nevertheless prevailed.

The Second Vatican Council (1962-1965) ushered in a new wind of change in the Catholic Church. The life approach in doing theology, the new thinking in soteriology, the statements on inculturation of the Gospel message prompted a fresh look at the issue of puberty initiation rites.

On the local scene, the attainment of political independence on 6th July 1964 led to concerted efforts to explore traditional cultural values. A cultural revival policy launched by the Ministry of Education and Culture was pursued vigorously with the view of promoting cultural activities that were not detrimental to national development. Since the attainment of independence into the hands of Malawian Bishops, one can indeed say that this has backed up seriously the challenges of inculturation of the Gospel as advocated by the Second Vatican Council, given also the favourable and conducive atmosphere reigning in the country.

The issue of puberty initiation rites was taken up once again in several dioceses but with little success. The institution of *Chinamwali cha Chikhristu* (Christian Initiation Rite) was reminiscent of the one Bishop Auneau had initiated in the 1940s. Bishop Chimole wrote: "When I took over, I tried in the early 70s to experiment again with children preparing for Confirmation in an effort to coordinate physical maturity with Christian maturity. But this experiment had to be abandoned again because of abuses" (Letter, Bishop M.A Chimole to Fr. Vincent Chilolo, April 1987).

One may wonder why this experiment carried out by 'a son of the soil' did not succeed. Given the prevalent atmosphere of cultural assertion at both church and national levels that did exist during Bishop Chimole's time, there should have been a better chance for arriving at a satisfactory conclusion on the issue. The mistakes and weaknesses that had led to the failure of the pioneering experiment could have been avoided. Nevertheless, I would like to suggest three weaknesses that may help to account for the failure of the experiment.

In the first place, the introduction of the *Chinamwali cha Chikhristu*, though undoubtedly motivated by a great zeal to bring the Gospel into the traditional puberty rites, was undermined by the 'anti-pagan' approach. This approach pre-supposes that African traditional cultural realities are incompatible with the Gospel, reminiscent of the Biblical saying: 'nothing good can come from Nazareth.' It is distinguished from the 'seeds-of-the-Gospel' approach which views traditional realities as having positive elements which are a preparation for the Gospel. While Bishop Chimole definitely understood the importance and the values, both positive and negative, of puberty rites, the 'anti-pagan' approach could not assure him with

certainty about the purity and orthodoxy of the *Chinamwali cha Chikhristu* practice. The pre-occupation with guarding the institution from being 'paganized' rather than ensuring that it blended well the traditional and the Christian values into an acceptable rite was, in my opinion, the obvious cause for failure. No wonder that the experiment was not given enough of an incubation period.

Secondly, the experiment would appear to have been started without adequate preparation. The priests, religious laity and particularly the instructors, should have been engaged in a research and dialogue on the issue, considering that it had been labelled as a 'heathen practice' since the early days of the planting of the Church. In this connection, Bolaji Idowu's remark is relevant: "All over Africa people have been led to the stage of despising their own native tradition and cultures and of regarding foreign ideas and cultures as the only way to human dignity" (Cited in Dickson and Ellingworth, 1969, p. 15). It is not surprising, therefore, that when the Christian puberty initiation rite was introduced, people had divided opinions which I shall turn to later.

Another experiment, initiated by a team of progressive Dutch Montfort missionaries at Njale Parish in Chikwawa Diocese, took a different approach. The neophytes were brought to the bush for three weeks during which they received instructions on physiology and good moral life given by selected Christian elders. At the end of the period there was a 'coming out' ceremony from the Simba and the Christian community received the 'new people' with jubilation.

All in all, the experiment tried to follow closely the traditional rite which even included an adaptation of the circumcision rite for boys.³ It appeared to have received a good response from the local community and soon became the 'talk' of the Diocese. However, the ceremony was only repeated once and discontinued after the incumbent missionaries had left and were replaced by a conservative team of another missionary congregation. Many Catholics accept that puberty rites have, in the final analysis, positive values that are in line with the authentic Christian doctrine, as well as negative elements which stand contrary to the Gospel. Positively they are regarded as an educational institution for inculcating ancestral traditions, preparation for marriage and instilling good discipline in the initiates. Healthy social relationships are cultivated and fostered as the initiates

³ In Mangochi Diocese, the boys are sent to a Catholic hospital to be circumcised.

learn to live together in a community that has undergone the same experience. Through the rites, the initiates are taught how to endure the hardships of life and are introduced to the realities of adulthood and of the wider world. Apart from enabling the neophytes to find a new place in the society and to be accepted in it, the puberty rites confer cultural or ethnic identity on them.

However, objections are raised against the content of the education on sexual matters. This content is regarded as too advanced for boys and girls of seven to twelve years of age who go in for Chidotolo and Chiputu initiation ceremonies. It is therefore prone to encourage promiscuous behaviour. Furthermore, the going into the bush for initiation, the medicines used, the ordeals that have to be endured, the use of obscene language, the singing of obscene songs, are all regarded as degrading and inhuman. Finally, the practice of manipulating the labia minora in the case of girls is considered detrimental to their moral behaviour. While the instructions given during the Ndakula initiation ceremony are regarded as appropriate and more relevant to the age of the initiates, the main cause of objection against it is the singing and drumming that goes on. This practice is regarded as pagan.

In the final analysis, there is a general feeling among Catholic Christians that a total condemnation of the puberty initiation rites is not only unfair but also creates a vacuum in their cultural life. There is always a sense of uneasiness among them until this vacuum is filled. Some are of the opinion that where modern education and the living standards have advanced, like in the urban areas, the need for these institutions of socialization will die out. Others feel that the urge to send their children for initiation is still there, only that they fear sanctions by the Church. Therefore, unless the Church comes up with something solid and concrete, the problem will persist.⁴

After the experiment to substitute the traditional puberty initiation rites with the *Chinamwali cha Chikristu* (Christian initiation) had failed, the Church unilaterally and categorically proclaimed a ban on traditional initiation, with sanctions attached to it. Catholic parents or guardians who

⁴ At the 3rd conference for Catholic Primary School Teachers of Zomba Diocese held on 4th April, 1986, the teachers pointed out that the problem of puberty initiations has to be researched into because many Catholics are not satisfied with the "Christian" initiation because it is superficial.

sent their children to the traditional puberty initiation rites were automatically debarred from receiving the sacraments until they fulfilled the required demands for reconciliation. At a clergy meeting of Zomba Diocese held in 1967, it was decided that: “Those who have on purpose sent their children to the initiation ceremony, should be given a penalty of some sort, say, three days’ instructions after which they could be received to the sacraments” (Council of Priests, Zomba Diocese, minutes of 21/11/1967).

Again, eight years later, at another meeting it was agreed that:

Parents who have sent their children to Chinamwali are to be given a series of special instructions leading up to confession. Payment of a sum of money to the Parish is suggested as a penance or act of reparation after confession even before confession at the end of the instruction (Minutes of the meeting held on 9/4/1975).

However, despite the Church’s efforts to stop Catholics from going for such practices, there are still many cases every year of parents who send their children to these traditional rites.

In an effort to reinforce further the ban on the traditional puberty initiation rites, the Diocese opted for a more severe attitude towards the ‘culprits’ by referring their cases for reconciliation to the Bishop or his Vicar. In the minutes of the Zomba Diocesan Council of Priests held on 17th November 1982, it was stated:

The procedure for those who have been to Chinamwali remains unchanged. Parents and child must see the Bishop (Minutes of the meeting held on 17/11/1982).

The hard line taken by Zomba Diocese is typical of the prevailing attitude in Southern Malawi.⁵ It has sparked off a long-drawn debate on the appropriate pastoral approach to be taken.

One informant who supports the ban had this to say:

The local Church is doing the right thing by condemning these initiation rites because even though there are both good and bad elements during initiation, it is a well-known fact that people are more attracted to bad things than good ones. The bad things always overshadow the good ones. For this reason, it is right that the Church does not allow her members to participate in the initiation rites (Fr. Beck and Fr. J. Paul, Zomba Diocese response to questionnaire, August 1986).

⁵ The Comboni Missionaries who had just held one session of *Chinamwali cha Chikhristu* at Lirangwe Parish in Blantyre Archdiocese were told by the Archbishop the Most Rev James Chiona, to discontinue the practice.

Another informant who does not support the ban said: “I don’t think that the local Church has taken a right approach towards those who are involved. It is too scrupulous when it comes to this question of initiation rites. It is frightened even to hear the word ‘initiation’” (Interview, Fr V. Chilolo with Rev Fr. F.X. Loughran, former Vicar General of Zomba Diocese 25/8/1986).

People disagree when it comes to the question as to whether or not the Church is doing well by condemning these rites and beyond that by ‘punishing’ those who participate in them. Many people who have been educated in Catholic schools look upon these initiation rites as devilish and, therefore, incompatible with the Gospel. They say that the Church is doing well because it is the only way to preserve the faith. On the other hand, however, those who are in favour of the rites, are of the opinion that the Church is being unfair by condemning them and punishing the ‘culprits’. And while most of these people respect the Church’s stand and decision as the final word, what is clear is that there is a sense of dissatisfaction among some of them. The dissatisfaction is confirmed by the problems and tensions which arise as a reaction to the Church’s stand.

First of all, there is tension between what the Church says and what the cultural tradition has instituted with regard to puberty initiation rites. Therefore, Christians who are members of both the Church and society, find themselves torn between the two. And since they consider both Christianity and puberty initiation rites as equally important, they stick to both because they do not want to lose either. As a result, they lead a dualistic life, by wavering between the two worlds. Here the statement of the Catholic Higher Institute of Eastern Africa (CHIEA) Community is relevant. These people “constantly live in different, and sometimes opposite world-views: one based on genuine African life and culture and the other, on Western Christianity. This dualism causes great tensions, anguishes and personality conflicts” (AMECEA, 1986, p. 34).⁶

Some writers have also made similar observations. For instance, Bolaji Idowu has the following to say about this issue:

By miscarriage of purpose the church has succeeded in preaching to, and in teaching Africans about a strange God whom they have somehow come to identify as the God of the white man. But what has happened to the God

⁶ AMECEA stands for Association of Member Episcopal Conferences in Eastern Africa. In 1992 CHIEA obtained accreditation/charter from the Government of Kenya and became the Catholic University of Eastern Africa (CUEA).

as known to their forbearers-the God who is the foundation of their traditional belief? He still remains with them. And so we have left them with two Gods in their hands and thus made of them people of ambivalent spiritual lives. This impedes the progress of evangelism; it also results in a very dangerous kind of polytheism (Dickson and Ellingworth, 1969, p. 13).

The dualism and tensions which exist among the people means that up to now Christianity has not been made to feel completely at home in the region.

Secondly, there is the problem of drop-outs. Just as some people take a middle way between “Christianity” and “African Culture”, so also, there are others who, when confronted with this problem of the apparent conflict between the two, prefer to drop out rather than betray their cultural heritage. In other words, once these people find themselves at the “cross-roads” of Christianity and their culture, the lesser evil for them in this case is being faithful to their African culture and giving up the “Christianity”. When I asked a lady who had dropped out at Sitima Parish, why she had preferred to drop out instead of having her case rectified, she said: “The problem is that I have two more children who are not yet initiated. Even if I go back to the sacraments, when the time comes for them to go for initiation, I will find myself in the same situation. So, I find it better to remain aloof” (Interview with Rozina Gustor on 28/8/90).

In my analysis above, it is evident that one thing upon which most of the clergy and most of the laity agree is the fact that the puberty initiation rites have both good and bad elements. I have also shown that it is precisely because of the concurrence of these positive and negative elements that puberty initiations are a pastoral problem in the region, because different people have different reactions towards them.

My research reveals that quite a good number among the clergy are of the opinion that these puberty initiation rites should be got rid of and that the right way to effect this is by condemnations and by being as strict as possible with the people concerned. However, such an approach cannot subvert the people’s beliefs and customs and even their philosophy of life.

One thing easily forgotten is that we should:

Realize that excessive zeal to protect the Christian faith cannot but be a handicap to its propagation. It constitutes a handicap because we begin by thinking that the effect of God’s action depends on our advocacy. The truth of the matter is: neither theology nor evangelism we want to teach and say to people. They are properly defined in terms of what God has done, what God is doing and what God is saying to each people in their own native

context. Theology and evangelism are not directions as to what we think that people should be or what we want them to be: they are declarations of God and His sovereign love and will to all people (Dickson & Ellingworth, 1969, pp. 10-11).

Bühlmann also makes the following observations:

“As Jesus did not then come to destroy the law, the religion of the Old Testament, but to fulfil it and uplift it (Mt 5:17), so the Church ought not today destroy traditional African religion but fulfil it and bring all times and all religions to experience the unity of the saving act of God” (Bühlmann, 2001, p. 39).

In other words, the work of the pastors, the Vicars of Christ who have been entrusted with powers to bind and loosen (Mt. 16:19, 18:18), is not to fight for and rejoice at the death of these initiation rites. Their work is to seek ways and means in the light of the Gospel, how they can be fulfilled and uplifted with Christianity and Christ’s saving work. This is the cultural mission of the Church according to *Gaudium et Spes*, namely that the Church has to speak to people in the way they are and give answers to their questions. In short, it is the mission of the Church to make people more human and more free to be better people. They become more human and more free in confrontation with Jesus Christ (Lk 4:16-22). And when a person is more human he is able to relate humanity with his fellow men, and he is more divine and therefore, nearer to God. It is in this context that we can say: “The teaching of Jesus Christ and his redemption are, in fact, the complement, the renewal and the bringing to perfection, of all that is good in human tradition” (Hickey, 1982, p. 182).

To summarize our point here, we agree with Fourez that the right question which can help us judge whether the rite is a good one or not, is not to ask: “when should rites be considered pagan?” but rather “which are the rites that liberate people as individuals or groups and which ones oppress them?” (Fourez, 1983, p. 37).

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